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Seeing skiing in a whole new light

BOLD program helps those with visual impairments

By JODY L. MAYERS - GM Today Staff

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KEWASKUM - Feeling the sting of a crisp wind while hurtling down a ski hill is not a pleasure reserved for the sighted as 25 BOLD skiers proved at Sunburst Ski Area Sunday night.

The Southeastern Wisconsin Lions' Blind Outdoor Leisure Development program has been hosting the event since the beginning of the month.

Lion Hans Tietgen, a nationally certified ski instructor and supervisor of Sunburst's snow sport school, learned how to ski in the Alps 60 years ago.

BOLD, which offers a range of events for the blind and visually impaired, began on the slopes of Aspen, when ski instructor Jean Eymere lost his sight through diabetes.

Through trial and error, Eymere's friends found they could vocally guide him down the mountain, Tietgen said.

The Aspen Ski School invited a group from the Colorado School for the Deaf and Blind in Colorado Springs skiing and, in 1969, BOLD was born.

"When you teach a blind person to do something and see the smile on their faces, it's worth all the money in the world," said Tietgen.

In the 1970s, there were about 50 BOLD organizations around the country, but since then, the program has been in decline, Tietgen said.

"We are the only active one left," he said.

Kevin Meyers of Greenfield still feels the need for speed.

Meyers used to race hydro-planes in several states east of the Mississippi



Amber Bingen

Troy Derge of Mayville, left, and his skiing guide Scott McGregor of Muskego ride the chair lift at Sunburst Ski Hill in Kewaskum Sunday. Derge, who is visually impaired, has been skiing for seven years and McGregor has been a skiing guide for three years.



Amber Bingen

Guide Mary Blandino of West Allis, left, leads blind skier Richard Walter of Hartford through the chair lift line at Sunburst Sunday. Richard has been skiing since 1974 and Mary has been a skiing guide for 16 years.

until, in 1987, another boat struck him while he was racing down the Fox River.

"It's exciting. The thrill, that's what I used to have racing," Mey-ers said as he strapped on his ski boots.

Meyers was a skier before he lost his sight, and wasn't ready to give up on the sport.

"Since I've lost my sight, I learned if there is something I want to do, it's up to me to find out how," he said.

He called a friend and they headed over to Crystal Ridge in Franklin.

"It was a real challenge for me and for her," said Meyers. "She wiped out, I wiped out."

At the bottom of the hill, the pair met Mark Skerencak, who told him about the BOLD program.



Amber Bingen

Skiing guide Rick Skotzke of Waukesha holds onto Peggy Rider, 8, of West Bend as they take the rope lift up a hill at Sunburst Sunday. Rider, who is visually impaired, is a third-grader at Fair Park Elementary School in West Bend. She loves the rope lift because it's fun and it goes really fast. She has been skiing for a couple of weeks and Skotzke has been a skiing guide for 15 years.

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"The first thing I noticed is that I didn't know how to ski correctly. When I had my sight, I was using too much force instead of using the edge of the skis," said Meyers.

Bob McGregor and his son, Scott, are guides from Muskego.

Part of McGregor's training before guiding others involved skiing blindfolded.

"It's a totally different experience when you can't see what's coming. It's a very unreal feeling," said McGregor.

On Sunday, Mary Rider of West Bend waited in the lodge while her daughter, Peggy, went out with Rick Skot-zke, who has been guiding skiers for 15 years.

This is her 8-year-old daughter's third time on the slopes.

Peggy Rider was diagnosed with a brain tumor in July 2005 and, after surgery in August that year, lost half her vision.

"The first time was very scary," said Mary Rider. "Peggy has had so many limitations since her surgery."

"When she got out of the hospital, I said, 'She did it. She made it.' When she came down the hill the first time, I wanted to say the same thing," said Mary Rider.

Peggy, who has added skiing to her list of favorite things along with playing Twister, coloring, art and listening to Kid's Praise, takes her new skill more in stride than mom.

When asked if she was scared her first time down the bunny hill, Peggy answered, "a

little, not really."

This being her third time on the slopes, she even has a few bits of advice for novice skiers.

"Avoid people" and "it doesn't hurt to fall down," she said.

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